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Intelligence Memorandum

The Roots of Violence: The Urban Guerrilla in Argentina

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THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE: THE URBAN GUERRILLA IN ARGENTINA

A Climate of Violence

Violence is undermining democratic institutions in Argentina. The causes of this violence go far beyond the conflicts between the political right and left that have given rise to groups such as the People's Revolutionary Army, Montoneros, and Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance. These groups operate within a milieu that has shown a high tolerance for political violence during the past 40 years.

Argentina is not in the throes of a civil war, nor is it trying to shake free of authoritarian controls. Instead, the frequent recourse to illegal tactics, both by legitimate organizations and by guerrilla groups, appears to stem from the dashed hopes of a once optimistic society that has suffered from prolonged economic and political stagnation and a decline in its ability to influence hemispheric events. The failure to achieve a great destiny despite an abundance of natural resources and human talent has produced a pervasive crisis of national confidence. As one observer has written, "The Argentine people are unsure not only of their capacity for achievement, but even of their ability to confront the issues dividing them." Since 1930 the inability of national leaders to cope with major social and economic problems has resulted in seven military coups, recurrent bloody labor disputes, and recently a high level of terrorism and counterterrorism—perhaps the inevitable consequence of more than two generations of political drift.

The overthrow of President Yrigoyen in 1930 ended more than a half century of constitutionally elected governments and gave army leaders a new sense of identification as rightful guardians of the republic. This "revolution of 1930" also inaugurated a period of frequent recourse to the use or threat of violence to manipulate the governmental system through coercion rather than by constitutional procedures.

Violence has been a recurrent theme in a labor movement that was organized by socialist and anarchist immigrants in the late 19th century. During the early 1940s Juan Peron quashed dissent by whatever means were necessary for him to gain control of the unions. In the process of imposing unity, Peron succeeded in making the labor movement the most powerful political force after the military.

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A massive Peronist rally in government square. Many of the groups have since turned against the government of Mrs. Peron.

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During his 18-year exile, however, personal rivalries between union leaders and policy quarrels began a new cycle of divisive internal strife. The wave of strikes that started in the heavily industrialized provincial city of Cordoba in May 1969 was a dramatic manifestation of both resentment toward the government of General Ongania and tensions within Peronism. Its high level of violence created a new word—"cordobazo"—and spawned some of the leftist guerrilla groups operating today, primarily the Montoneros. At the height of the agitation, the murder of labor leader Augusto Vandor sparked a continuing series of assassinations that give union conflicts the appearance of gang warfare.

Before his return to power in 1973, Peron did not openly encourage violent opposition to the presidents who succeeded him, but he was reluctant to condemn those who acted against the military governments of Ongania, Levingston, and Lanusse. He condoned—and may even have ordered—the abduction and assassination of Pedro Aramburu, the general who had ousted him in 1955. As political opposition and violence began to force President Lanusse to become more conciliatory toward the Peronists during 1971 and 1972, Peron came under increasing pressure from the government to denounce terrorist assassinations. His usual reaction was to express shock or disapproval of the particular incident, but to couple this with a statement charging the government with creating a climate that fostered violence. On one occasion he commented that if he were 50 years younger, he too probably would be throwing bombs.

Until recently, Argentina was barren soil for leftist extremists. The stereotype Argentine was a basically conservative, family-oriented individual who enjoyed the good life of wine and steak and viewed most political developments with a mixture of detached cynicism and contempt. Anarchism was short lived; socialists and communists were nonviolent. In the early 1960s Fidel Castro was unable to organize a viable paramilitary force in northern Argentina.

There is no convenient explanation for the emergence of guerrilla movements in the late 1960s. One plausible rationale is that while popular expectations have apparently remained the same, the ability to satisfy these desires has dropped because of rampant inflation which inhibits productive growth and discourages savings. The failure of governments to muster sufficient political support or attract the administrative talent necessary to engage in effective planning has resulted in justifiable public disillusionment and dissatisfaction.

The rapid escalation of terrorist violence precipitated a counterterrorist reaction, as the government of Alejandro Lanusse recognized its inability to

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handle the problem by legal means. Publicly Lanusse denounced the use of torture, but privately he allowed security forces considerable freedom of action. Ultimately it was urban terrorism combined with growing labor unrest, as well as a realization that the army could not govern, that led Lanusse to conciliate the Peronists and return Argentina to electoral politics in 1973.

The Urban Guerrilla

The difficulties of operating in a rural environment, dramatized by the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia, impressed other guerrilla movements in Latin America. The shift of the guerrillas' activities to the cities was also an attempt to take advantage of changing social conditions. The rapid growth of Buenos Aires in the past 40 years has produced a sprawling megalopolis of approximately 600 square miles. Its vastness not only allows criminals and revolutionaries to find easy refuge but also absorbs isolated terrorist activities. This physical climate enables guerrillas to stage numerous terrorist events simultaneously with relative impunity.

Because Argentine guerrillas commit random acts of violence and abjure theories of revolutionary "stages" as developed by Mao Tse-tung or Che Guevara, the government frequently labels them wanton terrorists. In fact, however, they are skilled propagandists and political tacticians who employ terror as a psychological and military weapon. This is an important distinction, since it is their success in winning converts and gaining at least tacit support from the public that makes them a serious threat to the government.

As violence has increased, two leftist groups have emerged as particularly significant: the People's Revolutionary Army, which has supplanted the Armed Forces of Liberation as the major Marxist-oriented guerrilla organization; and the Montoneros, who have eclipsed two rival Peronist bands. Specific data on the leadership structure and size of these guerrilla groups are fragmentary, but current estimates place the strength of the ERP at 500-700, while the Montoneros are believed to have approximately 1,500 militants in the Buenos Aires area alone, and at least 15,000 sympathizers nationally.

Despite its comparative smallness, the ERP is the most widely feared leftist-extremist group. Created in July 1970 as the military arm of the Trotskyite Revolutionary Workers Party, it has since broken formally with the Fourth International but retains a strong Marxist-Leninist orientation. Its leader, Roberto Santucho, confers occasionally with Montonero chiefs, but he publicly rejects both Juan Peron and Peronism as "bourgeois."

In contrast, the Montoneros identify themselves as Marxist-Peronists. While they lack the ideological and organizational cohesiveness of the ERP,

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they are stronger politically, having devoted as much of their energies to proselytizing and legitimate reform as to guerrilla tactics. Unlike Santucho, Montonero spokesmen Roberto Quieto and Mario Firmenich do not identify the army as their principal enemy. Apparently, however, they share Santucho's desire to force a military coup, which would allow them to return to their earlier role as the vanguard of popular opposition to the government.

ERP and Montenero leaders have met occasionally, but the lack of any known joint operations suggests that their conferences have not been productive. In fact, available evidence indicates that the groups are strong rivals and that the ERP decided to abandon recent efforts to build a rural base, on the grounds that it had failed to achieve major success and had lost a psychological advantage to the Montoneros in the cities.

Beyond the fact that individual ERP members have traveled to Cuba, little is known about the international contacts of the Argentine guerrilla. Specific information is also lacking on foreign training; it is possible that none has been required.

To Destroy Is To Create?

The popular view of the urban guerrilla as a romantic nihilist may be an accurate appraisal, but it does not accord with the way the Argentine leftist sees himself. Despite the absence of profound theoretical writing and the apparent lack of ideological sophistication, both major guerrilla groups have shown exceptional talent and esprit de corps in terrorist operations. It is their demonstrated expertise, rather than their ill-defined, long-term objectives, that makes them important subjects of study.

The ERP has demonstrated a high degree of coordination in kidnapings of business executives and commando raids on small towns and military garrisons. Two of the most impressive operations, however, have been attributed to the Montoneros:

- The spectacular assassination of the police chief of Buenos Aires, Alberto Villar, one of the most heavily guarded public officials, in which only he and his wife were killed in an explosion as they boarded a yacht near Buenos Aires last November;

- The smoothly executed kidnaping of two wealthy industrialists, also closely protected. Their automobile was cut off from most of their bodyguards—a maneuver in which the guerrillas masqueraded as street construction workers and policemen.

These technically expert operations provide strong evidence for the view that guerrillas see violence as creative acts rather than as a last resort.

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The philosophy of Franz Fanon often has been echoed in Latin America: "Violence frees the (individual) from his inferiority complex and makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.... Terrorism is an act of growing up, not of adolescent nihilism." If this is an accurate explanation of the attitudes of Argentine guerrillas, then political labels mean less than psychological impulses.

Propaganda by Deed

The concept of propaganda by deed—which first appeared among militant populists in 19th century Russia—has been adopted by the extreme left in Argentina. The underground press conferences and the diatribes against specific enemy targets in speeches and pamphlets suggest a paramount concern with attracting immediate public attention to the cause. Unlike their rural counterparts, individual urban guerrillas often rely more on the anonymity of the big cities for survival than on direct support or complicity of the population. Nevertheless, their actions show that Argentine leftists have great concern for their public image and a desire to win at least tacit approval for their activities.

The ERP first attracted public notice in the same "Robin Hood" manner as the Tupamaros in neighboring Uruguay—hijacking trucks and delivering cargoes of food and milk to the poor. On January 6, 1971—the Twelfth Night of the Christmas season—the ERP joined with the Armed Forces of Liberation to distribute stolen toys to children in a Buenos Aires slum. This particular operation was especially effective, since the police, acting on behalf of the vandalized company, subsequently had to take the toys away from many of the children.

Although more violent activities have long been its hallmark, the ERP is still attentive to public opinion. Several months ago a systematic campaign of assassinations of army officers was halted as a result of public outrage over the killing of a major and his three-year-old daughter.

The Montoneros burst upon the scene in May 1970 with the abduction, "trial," and "execution" of former President Pedro Aramburu—the general who had sent Peron into exile in 1955. This revolutionary action defined them immediately as young Peronist militants. Since then, Montonero leaders have insisted that they are the "true" Peronists, even though they staged a walkout during one of Juan Peron's last public appearances and have since formally declared war on Mrs. Peron's government.

By their very nature, urban guerrilla movements are vulnerable to exploitation by criminal elements. Terrorist groups that resort to kidnapings for ransom and reprisal killings cannot avoid the danger that some of their

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members will use political labels merely for their own nefarious purposes (or that common criminals will pose as revolutionaries). To protect their revolutionary image, the guerrilla organizations have been highly selective in taking public credit for terrorist operations. Spokesmen Santucho, Firmenich, and Quieto have also sought to avoid being branded as mere murderers and ruffians, stating that they do not relish violence—an obvious attempt to justify their use of terror and reassert their ideological motives.

It would be unrealistic to dismiss these statements as simply rhetorical flourishes, for there is a concerted effort by the guerrillas to link actions and ideology. The overriding focus on tactics and operations, however, seems to imply a psychological tendency to become involved in "terrorism for terrorism's sake." The Argentine guerrillas are not known to have developed any new theories of revolution and apparently look for guidance to Carlos Marighella, slain Brazilian guerrilla tactician, rather than to Lenin, Mao, or Guevara. One astute observer of terrorist behavior, Edward Hyams, has noted that "terror as an attention-drawing tantrum can easily develop into a way of life. Power of any kind—legitimate or criminal—very soon ceases to be a means to some good end and becomes an end in itself."

An Aura of Legitimacy

The Montoneros' political orientation and strength have enabled them to play an effective legitimate role as well as an illegal one. Leftist Peronists, with Montonero support, fielded candidates in the recent Misiones provincial elections under the banner of the "Authentic Party." The Montoneros have also devoted much of their energy to supporting the wage demands of Peronist laborers through the surface organization of the Peronist Working Youth. Guerrilla support for these demands, and their related agitation, produced a widening cleavage between many of the rank and file and the union leaders who have tried to cooperate with the policies of Mrs. Peron's government.

While participation in legal activities makes a guerrilla group vulnerable to charges of "bourgeois softness" and organizational laxity, it is not uncommon for extremists to try to work within the system. Even the ERP publicly agreed to a tentative "truce" with the government of Peron's surrogate, Hector Campora. Such an approach lends an aura of reasonableness to the guerrilla cause and provides extremists with opportunities for recruitment among disillusioned adherents to ill-fated reformist causes.

Excesses of Counterterrorism

For almost six years, terrorist violence has been a major source of embarrassment for Argentine governments. Under President Lanusse, the

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failure of security forces to maintain order in the streets resulted in the formation of right-wing death squads whose extralegal operations were officially sponsored or at least countenanced by the military government. The Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (AAA), which emerged in August 1974, has achieved greater notoriety than its predecessors, but it represents merely a continuation of para-police activities against leftists that began as early as 1970.

The Peronists continue to deny any association with the AAA, even though Lopez Rega, the power behind Mrs. Peron, is widely believed by the Argentine public to be its head. In fact, the AAA may not be a unified group but a collection of several uncoordinated terrorist bands consisting of off-duty policemen, retired military officers, labor union "goons," and even criminals. An image of unity has been created, however, because all communiques are issued in the name of the AAA.

The frequent linking of Lopez Rega's name to the AAA has caused many observers to wonder why he has not been assassinated by the leftist extremists. Ironically, however, the overreactive nature of the AAA makes the leftists look good by comparison. In fact, because Lopez Rega is generally viewed as "someone to hate," he is probably more vulnerable to an attack from Peronists or another politically respectable group that would want to get rid of this right-wing strong man who continually thwarts efforts to create national stability.

Argentine leftist guerrillas are not indiscriminate in their use of terrorism. They have always restricted their targets to identified political enemies: policemen, army officers, business leaders, and foreign diplomats. Even the kidnaping and assassination of honorary US Consul John Egan could be justified in terms of terrorist propaganda, on the grounds that the Argentine government was unable to secure Egan's release because it had murdered or disfigured by torture the individuals demanded as ransom.

In contrast, the counterterrorists have threatened or murdered several prominent liberal members of society not linked in any known way to the guerrillas. Popular singers, actors, writers, university professors, and even congressmen have been placed on AAA death lists for supposedly being intellectual purveyors of Marxism. The use of such lists, coupled with sadistic ritual assassinations, is effective in cowing many who might conceivably support leftist activities, but it has also dissipated popular support for the government and threatens to undermine the President's constitutional authority. Moreover, the administration's inability to cope with major economic and social issues makes the guerrillas important and dangerous political actors.

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Prospects

Sustained violence has already had a corrosive effect on Mrs. Peron's government. The preoccupation with terrorism and the left-right splits within the Peronist labor movement have prevented government officials from focusing effectively on economic and political problems. Military leaders have condoned Lopez Rega's meddling in security affairs, despite their stated objections to his influence, largely because of his hard-line position toward the left. Ironically, it is Lopez Rega who has handicapped efforts to improve the efficiency of the police force by promoting incompetent sycophants to positions of authority. The failure of Mrs. Peron and Lopez Rega to conciliate militants within the Peronist labor movement has enabled the Montoneros to exploit union unrest.

Argentina is probably destined for an army coup sooner rather than later. And when it comes, the terrorists will escalate their attacks to cause as much disorder as possible. During the past year, force increasingly has supplanted reasoned debate in the political arena, and armed confrontation has taken the place of efforts to reconcile dissenters. The Peronists and other political parties have once again failed to lead the nation.

In Argentina today, terrorism is a political catalyst that initiates a vicious cycle of terror and counterterror. Repression rarely produces revolution, but it can lead to the collapse of consensus and a loss of faith in democratic ideals.

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